



A Jigsaw of Fire and Stars

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Sante can juggle, sing and dance, walk on a wire, turn somersaults, do back flips on her stallion, Taj Mahal. That's not the half of it. Her birth name was Asantewaa, an Ashanti from Ghana. As a baby she survived when a trawler carrying refugees to Europe was deliberately rammed and sunk. She is also a 'mind-whisperer', able to tune in to other people's thoughts; 'catching the fizz and whirl of what's deep inside 'em is what I do best,' she says. She whispers into the mind of Priss, a golden eagle who watches over her, and she even whispers to the spirits of the unquiet dead drowned that day in the Mediterranean, revisiting those desperate moments night after night in her dreams. Sometimes she's close to her infant self, launched clear of the carnage in her sea-chest cradle; sometimes she looks down, riding the gales on Priss's back, sharing her eagle's eye view.

British-Ghanaian writer Yaba Badoe may well be drawing on storytelling roots nurtured well beyond Europe. She's wild and daring in the risks she takes in her frequent images 'yet unselfconscious: 'suddenly, the love-shine in him beams from his face and licks mine?'; 'he steps slow as a parson on the highway to hell?'. She needs her darker images, for the evil threading through this adventure drives not only the murderous shipwreck, but also the sex-trafficking of teenagers reduced to helpless prey for human vultures ' rich old men and cackling old women.

Readers need to be alert to judge what's dream and what's tangible, what's spoken and what's thought, for apart from Sante's mind-whispering, her friends the twins Cobra and Cat also need no words to sense the other's thoughts or whereabouts. Then there's the only other survivor of the shipwreck; he too can summon up the restless drowned - but is he on her side? Among those victims were Sante's mother and father, refugees driven North by climate change and its consequences. Sante finds them in her dreams, dwelling outside time in a spiritual otherworld; she needs to draw strength and love from them to tackle the perils back in her own time.

And the plot? All those circus skills were hard-won through disciplined training, for when Sante was cast ashore, she was found by Priss and also by Mama Rose, Redwood the Harvard graduate, Midget Man, Bizzie Lizzie and their friends who travel the roads of Southern Europe, living 'off the grid' beyond the grasp of Authority, performing as Mama Rose's Family Circus. Sante's 14 now and she, Cobra and his snakes - ever responsive to his mystical summons - and Cat with her flashing knives are the stars of the show. It's a good life, not least because Sante's certain that one day she'll marry Cobra. Sure, the Young Ones are impatient with the Old Ones at times ' and vice versa - but

that's Families for you. Tensions become serious when the teenagers help to rescue a strange red-headed English girl, Scarlett, who has walked naked into the Atlantic near Cadiz with no intention of coming back. The Old Ones are far from sure they want to take her in, but Cat and Scarlett have connected with a passion that brooks no challenge. So Scarlett stays.

As Sante and her friends seek those who killed her parents and their fellow refugees in the shipwreck, her enemies are hunting her since they want their share of the treasures which were packed alongside her in the sea-chest cradle. In the violent climax, snakes and moths and a single dagger are lethal weapons as the unquiet spirits take a final revenge. There are no easy comic distractions. It's breath-taking stuff, handled with the daring and pace demanded by the risks of such storytelling. Things don't get much more original than this.

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